# Register-Free and Register-Specific Collocations : A Problem for Translators.

Rafid Abdul-Ameer Ghaeb (PhD)
Dept. of Translation / Al-Ma'moun University College

## Abstract

**Collocation is one of the old, intensively investigated topics, but whose results are, unfortunately, not been made use of. This is evident from translators' serious difficulties in handling this aspect of language. The problem becomes even more serious when it comes to collocations in specialized texts (i.e. register-specific collocations). To verify this observation, a test was designed in which twenty five fourth-year students were asked to translate twelve sentences without being told about the test objective so that the responses are spontaneous and thus more reliable. The test results verified the hypothesis on which this paper was based; test subjects scored 38.4% of correct responses in dealing with register-free collocations, while this percentage declined to 15.4% in dealing with register-specific collocations. The paper attempted to highlight the causes behind such unpleasant performance. Finally, the paper gives some remedial suggestions which are hoped to contribute in overcoming the difficulties encountered in this respect.**

**Key words**: collocation, register-free, register-specific.

# استقصاء مشاكل ترجمة المتلازمات اللفظية في اللغة العامة واللغة الاصطلاحية

د. رافد عبد الامير غائب
كلية المامون الجامعة / قسم الترجمة

**المستخلص**
**تعد المتلازمات اللفظية من المواضيع التي نالت حظا وافرا من البحث والاستقصاء دون الافادة الحقيقية من النتائج التي توصلت اليها تلك الدراسات. وتصبح المشكلة اكثر تعقيدا عندما يتعلق الامر بالتعامل مع المتلازمات اللفظية في اللغة الاصطلاحية (اي النصوص المتخصصة). وللتاكد من هذه الفرضية فقد صمم الباحث اختبارا شمل اثنا عشر نصا من النصوص العامة والنصوص الاصطلاحية، واجري الاختبار على عينة من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة في قسم الترجمة / كلية المامون الجامعة شملت خمسة وعشرين طالبا. وقد اكدت نتائج الاختبار صحة الفرضية التي بنيت عليها هذه الدراسة، حيث بلغت نسبة الترجمة السليمة في اللغة العامة 38% بينما كانت النسبة اقل بكثير فيما يتعلق بترجمة المتلازمات اللفظية في اللغة الاصطلاحية (بحدود 15%). وهذا يؤشر الى ان موضوعة المتلازمات اللفظية وبالرغم من التركيز النظري عليها في المناهج الدراسية المعدة لتدريب طلبة قسم الترجمة فان الواقع شيء اخر. وقد حاولت الدراسة تسليط الضوء على اسباب هذا الضعف وبالتالي تقديم بعض التوصيات التي يامل الباحث ان تسهم في تحسين مستوى اداء المترجمين للتعامل مع هذا الموضوع المهم.**

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** المتلازمات اللفظية ، اللغة العامة ، اللغة الاصطلاحية .

## 1. Introduction

Collocations are pervasive in language and play a significant role in any act of communication ( see Hoey, 2005). Manning and Schutze (1999:14) define collocation as "an expression consisting of two or more words that correspond to some conventional way of saying things". Since it was first introduced by Firth in (1951) being one of the three facets of context, collocation has received a very wide interest by the scholars of the various schools of linguistics. This interest is motivated by the crucial role it plays in constructing the idiomaticity and idiosyncrasy of language. In fact, specialists

agree that a healthy repertoire of collocations is essential to the mastery of a foreign language. In translation, too, the significance of "collocation" is pointed at, for "If grammar is the bones of a text, collocations are the nerves, more subtle and multiple and specific in denoting meaning, and lexis is the flesh" (Newmark, 1988:213). The various causes of recognizing the importance of "collocation" in translation can be summed up in the following points:

1. Choosing the correct collocation will make the translated text more natural and thus more easily understood (www.englishclub.com). This indicates that appropriate collocation will achieve naturalness of expression which is an essential factor of successful communication.
2. Readers of a translated text unconsciously predict what is going to be said based on the use of phrases (Deveci, 2004:17).
3. Appropriate collocation will minimize the possibility of misinterpretation, "The precise meaning in any context is determined by that context: by the words that surround and combine with the core word – by collocation" (Oxford Collocation Dictionary, 2002:9).

Collocations can be of a general as well as of a specialized character (i.e. register-free and register-specific), depending on whether the text at hand is a general or a specialized one. For instance, dull highlights and vigorous depressions are odd combinations in everyday English, but are quite common collocations in the fields of photography and meteorology respectively. By the same token, biased error and tolerable error are not used in general English, but are frequent in the field of statistics (Baker, 1992:52). This recognition of collocation on register puts a burden on the translator to get increasingly familiar with the kind of language he deals with while performing his job.

Despite recognizing the significance of collocation and despite the focus it is given in the syllabus design of the departments of translation in Iraqi universities , it is observed that translation students, as well as translators at work, still face tremendous difficulties in dealing with this important aspect of language. Moreover, the difficulty even intensifies when it comes to dealing with collocation in register-specific texts.

This paper is intended to verify and/or refute such observation through conducting a test on fourth-year students at the Department of Translation at Al-Ma'moun University College in which they are asked to translate general as well as specialized texts. It first casts light on the various types of collocation with the purpose of delimiting the kind of collocation adopted in this study. It then moves on to discuss the major sources of hindering successful rendering of collocation interlingually. Finally the test results are tabulated and discussed, in the light of which some recommendations of how to tackle this aspect in translation are set down.

2. **Range and Types of Collocation**

This section is designed to delimiting the range of collocation and stating its commonest types in an attempt to show how it is used in this study and which types are adopted.

According to the available literature, Halliday and Hassan (1976) seem to be the first to point to the wide range of collocation when they used the term as a subclass of lexical cohesion that covers any instance which involves a pair of lexical items that are associated with each other in the language in some way. Bischof (2004) states it more clearly in writing that collocations "…are situated on a scale between free word-combinations and idioms". Thus, word combinations range from loose (incidental) collocation to frozen groupings (idioms). Lewis (1988) gives the terms (strong, medium, and weak) to define three ranges of

collocation. Baker (1992:50) (citing Beekman and Callow, 1974) mentions two factors that influence the range of collocation. The first is the level of specifity: the more general a word is, the broader its collocational range; the more specific it is, the more restricted its collocational range. The second factor is the number of senses a collocate has. Neither of these ends is meant to be adopted in this paper; rather this paper is after what is customary , or predictable so to use Crystal's terms (1995), in every-day use of language.

As for types, collocations can be classified, in addition to range discussed above, in terms of meaning, register, and formal patterns.

In terms of meaning, Cowie (1983) distinguished between restricted and open collocations. The former refers to the two word-grouping where one word is used in its literal meaning and the second is used in a figurative meaning (e.g. to jog somebody's memory). The latter refers to that grouping where both constituents are used in their literal meaning (e.g. fill the bucket). Other terms are also used for such divisions (transparent vs. opaque, natural vs. conventional, etc.).

Concerning register, collocations are divided into register-specific and register-free (technical vs. general) as discussed earlier (see section one above).

Formally, collocations may be either of the following commonest structural patterns (adv. + adj., adj. + n., n. + n., n. + v., v. + expression with preposition, v. + n., v. + adv.).

**3. Potential Obstacles in Translating Collocations**

This section is intended to sorting out the major causes of failing to translate collocations properly. It is to be noted that only difficulties pertaining to English-Arabic and Arabic-English translation are dealt with here as the study is concerned with collocation in relation to these two languages only.

1. The first cause is related to the pedagogical negligence of collocation. The syllabuses used to train students of translation place much attention on "…the grammatical, phonological and orthographic aspects of language" in comparison with the lexical component (Sadeghi, 2010). Moreover, when the lexical level draws any attention, then there is more "…concentration on the paradigmatic relations of lexical items. Very little attention is paid to the syntagmatic aspect of lexis" (ibid). After reviewing the syllabuses of the departments of translation, it has been found that collocation is loosely mentioned here and there. When it comes to practice, the problem is deepened in that collocation is given very little attention, if any. In other words, and in case there is any attention there seems to be a sort of discrepancy between theory and practice.
2. Related to the first cause, and as a result of infrequent and unconscious exposure to the TL collocations, the SL exercises much influence on the translating process as a whole. For example, the Arabic collocation " يخرق القانون " is almost always conveyed in the translators' minds to correlate to breach the law instead of the more likely break the law as break is immediately responded to as "يكسر".
3. Another source of difficulty is related to the idiosyncratic meaning a word acquires from co-occurring with another word in a collocation (Bennett, 1981:273). This indicates that the meaning of a collocation cannot be predicted from the meanings of its constituting parts. In this connection, Lu and Zhou (2004:1) maintain that collocations "…are idiosyncratic in the sense that they are unpredictable by

syntactic or semantic features". For instance. 'heavy' is always understood to mean ثقيل ; however it can acquire a variety of senses depending on what it collocates with as shown in the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| Heavy smoker | مدخن شره |
| Heavy sleep | نوم عميق |
| Heavy fog | ضباب كثيف |
| Heavy rain | مطر غزير |

These different senses the word 'heavy' can display make it very difficult to predict its collocational patterns. Thus, unless well familiar with the idiosyncratic meanings of 'heavy' in different collocational environments, a non-English speaker can hardly guess these extended meanings.

4. Another cause of difficulty is related to the differences of the collocational range across languages. It is quite frequent to find differences in the semantic mapping a collocate manifests. This is related to the society's experience with events that have come to become social norms. For instance, English differentiates between *hard drink* and *soft drink* where the first includes spirits such as *whisky, gin, and brandy*, and the latter includes such drinks as *beer, lager*, etc. (Baker, 1992:56). Arabic uses the inclusive " المشروبات الكحولية " to refer to both categories. So rendering such collocations into English is expected to be problematic in that the general, rather than the specific, is used and consequently certain entailments, not intended in the SL, are inferred.
5. Naturalness of expression poses another burden on the translator in that it creates an obstacle to easy, spontaneous

translation the translator must pay attention to. It is a common phenomenon that a word acquires a new form when it enters into collocation with another word so that it seems more natural in the TL. For example, *dry* is translated into "جاف" in *dry region*, but it can by no means so translated in *dry voice* where another form is required to match the naturalness of Arabic "صوت اجش".

**4. Research Methodology: test & testees**

In order to highlight the problem at hand and verify and/or refute the hypothesis on which this paper is based, a test was designed to be distributed among a sample of translation trainees in their final stage of training. The test is made up of 12 mini texts (in the form of sentences). It is a mixture of register-free (2, 6, 8, 10, and 12) and register-specific (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 11) texts (see Appendix). Realizing the importance of exposure in dealing with register-specific texts, the researcher was keen to choose them from texts which test subjects have studied. To be representative, the test covered almost all text types which testees are required to cover in their study career. Thus, the registers covered are; scientific & technical, legal, media, and administrative. Literary register was intentionally avoided as linguistic norm in a literary text can hardly exist (i.e. violation of any linguistic norm, including collocation, is tolerated and sometimes recommended to create the literariness of a text). For the purpose of reliability and authenticity, the test subjects were not told of the test objective; they were simply asked to translate the twelve texts so that they pay equal attention to all

linguistic levels and the results thus reveal their true mastery of collocation.

The test was distributed among 25, fourth-year students at the Department of Translation / Al-Ma'moun University college. The sample of testees covered all students' standards (excellent, very good, good, and fair), thus the test is comprehensive. The test was carried out in the second week of May / 2015, the time when students should have covered their syllabuses to guarantee they have passed the test material as it is part of their curriculum.

## 5.The Test: Results, Discussion, and Recommendations

### 5.1Results

This section tabulates the test results along with percentages of correct responses. It consists of two tables; the first give details of the test material, responses and percentages of correct responses for every item. The second gives the overall mean percentages of register-free and register-specific proper answers separately.

Table (1) consists of five columns; the first for the test item serial number, the second for the targeted collocation, the third for the variety of responses along with their frequency, the fourth for the model answer, and the last for the percentages of correct answers for every item.

(Table) Descriptive Statistics of the Test Results

| **Serial No.** | **Targeted Collocations** | **Responses & Frequencies** | **Model Answers** | **Percentages of Correct Responses** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | المضغ الجيد | -good mastication (7)<br>-good chewing (14)<br>-mastication (1)<br>-perfect chewing (1)<br>-fine chewing (1)<br>-good crunch (1) | perfect mastication | 0% |
| (2) | اقامت .... حفلة | - had …. party (4)<br>- celebrated … party(2)<br>- held ….. party (3)<br>- made ….. party (11)<br>- set up …. party (1)<br>- did ….. party (3)<br>- established … party (1) | 1. gave …. party<br>2. had ….. party<br>3. held …. party | 28% |
| (3) | التجارة المستترة | - hidden trade (11)<br>- black marketing ( 5)<br>- covered trade (3)<br>- undercover trade (2) | clandestine trade | 0% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | - ongoing trade (1)<br>- covert trade (1)<br>- hidden commerce (1)<br>- trafficking (1) | | |
| (4) | مجلسا للعدل | - justice council (19)<br>- council (<br>- notary council (1)<br>- justice assembly (1)<br>- justice synod (1)<br>- justice conference (1) | notary council | 4% |
| (5) | الاماكن المنخفضة | - low places (17)<br>- low areas (3)<br>- low-lying places (2)<br>- holes (1)<br>- low land (1)<br>- shallow places (1) | low-lying places | 8% |
| (6) | غبيا تماما | - totally stupid (7)<br>- stupid act (6)<br>-completely stupid (3)<br>-very stupid (2)<br>- exactly stupid (2)<br>-quite stupid (1)<br>- really stupid (1)<br>- dam (1)<br>-definitely stupid (1)<br>- entirely stupid (1) | utterly stupid | 0% |
| (7) | اسلحة الدمار الشامل | -weapons of mass destruction (13)<br>-avoidance (3)<br>-destruction weapons (2)<br>-chemical weapons (1)<br>-nuclear weapons (1)<br>-full wreck weapons (1)<br>-high weapons (1)<br>-harm weapons (1)<br>-total weapons (1)<br>-mass weapons (1) | weapons of mass destruction | 52% |
| (8) | عملا شاقا | | hard work | 80% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (9) | جزءا لايتجزأ | -hard work (20)<br>-tiring work (3)<br>-difficult work (1)<br>-drudgery work (1) | integral part | 44% |
| (10) | فرصة ذهبية | -integral part (11)<br>-part and parcel (8)<br>-a part (3)<br>-important part (1)<br>-unavoidable part (1)<br>-main part (1) | golden opportunity | 40% |
| (11) | يعقد الزواج | -golden opportunity (10)<br>-golden chance (8)<br>-golden rule (2)<br>-great chance (1) | marriage is entered into | 0% |
| | | -good opportunity (1)<br>-good chance (1)<br>- sincere opportunity (1)<br>-great opportunity (1) | | 44% |
| (12) | اسديت معروفا | -marriage is held (11)<br>-marriage with agreement (4)<br>-marriage is done (3)<br>-marriage is made (3)<br>-marriage with mutual consent (2)<br>-marriage is contracted (1)<br>-marriage ravels (1)<br>-do a favor (11)<br>-make a favor (4)<br>-avoidance (10) | do a favor | |

- Mean of correct responses (register-free) : 38.4%
- Mean of correct responses (register-specific) : 15.4%

## 5.2 Discussion

The results of the test portray a gloomy picture of the testees' awareness of collocation. As expected and, in line with logic, better performance, though still painfully weak, was achieved in relation to register-free collocations than with register-specific ones; 38.4% vs. 15.4%. Entire focus on one word, being the core of the text and thus more attractive (i.e. word paradigmatic relations), has resulted in declining to pay attention to the syntagmatic grouping of words. It could also be interpreted that this focus is the result of the test subjects' belief that the test objective is finding such a term. This is evident in text (1) where no testee has been able to respond properly to the intended collocation. Dictionaries say that *mastication* and *chewing* have almost the same denotation. They, however, differ in their connotations in that the former is more formal and thus restricted to the medical field, whereas the latter is used in everyday communication ( a closer look, however, shows that *chewing* means قضم rather than هضم).This interprets why the majority resorted to *chewing* (60%) of responses. Even those who were able to grasp the register failed the more likely neighboring word *perfect*.

Decontextualization is another factor that played a key role in subjects' responses. Most of them failed, in more than one occasion, to recognize the register-specific feature of a collocation. This is clear in text "3" التجارة المستترة where مستترة has been readily rendered into the rather register-free hidden (44%), covered (12%) and some scattered words denoting, more or less, to the general sense of the intended collocate;

Manning and Schutze (1999: 172-3) maintain that near-synonyms cannot be used to replace any element of collocation. The result has been 0% appropriate response. This is also true of text "5" منخفضة is translated into *low* (68%), whereas only (8%) of responses opted for the proper low-lying. In text "4" the word عدل is also taken in its general, rather than context-dependent, meaning. This interprets why 76% of the testees opted for justice instead of the desired notary. In text "11" يعقد is mostly taken in its general meaning similar to that in يعقد مؤتمرا, يعقد اجتماعا etc. failing to grasp the legalese overtone of the text.

The influence of the SL has also contributed to the test subjects' erroneous options. This is clear in texts "2" and "6". In "2" made is resorted to more than any other option to stand for the Arabic اقامت (44%) under the influence of the semi-standard عملت حفلة عيد ميلادها or even the more colloquial in Iraqi Arabic سوت. Some testees even chose the paraphrase strategy celebrated … birthday (8%) which is undesirable as it is opted for only when readily available equivalent declines to communicate the intended message. In text "6" the test subjects opted for the rather strong adverbs quite, totally, completely, entirely, etc. This is the ideological influence of Arabic, for this pattern of thinking is common in the Arabs' mentality.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

The results of the test point to a serious weakness in dealing with collocation, collocation. This section pinpoints the

approaches suggested for dealing with this important notion of language.

There opposing views over how to handle collocations. It should be kept in mind that collocations are semantically arbitrary restrictions, so they are not rule-driven. Accordingly linguists suggest two different approaches for dealing with collocation. Linguists like Ellis (2001), Durrant (2014) suggest that SL collocation learning is frequency-driven, and that this strategy can be extended to include learning TL collocations. This view is psycholinguistically enhanced in that more repetition leads to incorporating a new behavior. This view interprets why a relatively high percentage of translation trainees were able to score the correct answer in text "9" integral part (44%) although it is register-specific. This is because this collocation is very frequent in every legal and legal-like texts.

A contrary view is forwarded by Wray (2002) who see that L2 learners tend to allow the collocations they encounter pass unnoticed, and that conscious focusing on these collocations help in overcoming this problem.

In fact both approaches are useful and have apparent merits. Thus both can be used in a teaching class through exposing translation students to the same collocation patterns frequently so as to enhance their unconscious awareness of collocation. Moreover, translation instructors are advised to delimit, at the end of every lecture/text, the most frequent collocations in the text. This would support the students' conscious awareness of collocation. Instructors, in addition, can advise students to buy dictionaries of collocation in order

to have his/her students pay attention to collocation similar to that they pay to grammatical rules and lexical selection, Oxford Dictionary of Collocation (regularly updated) is a useful reference in this respect.

## 7.Conclusions

The present paper has arrived at a number of conclusions which can be summed up in the following points:

1.Although collocation is given focus in the syllabuses designed to train translation students, practice reveals that this aspect of language is given little attention. In other words, there is discrepancy between theory and practice as far as collocation is concerned.

2. The hypothesis on which this study is based is verified. Advanced level translation trainees suffer serious weakness in dealing with collocation. The mean of the correct responses gives an unpleasant picture (27%).

3. The other hypothesis related to the register is also verified. Test subjects were able to score better in register-free collocations (38.4%) than in register-specific ones (15.4%).

4. Test subjects' erroneous responses are attributed to three factors; the influence of the SL (both linguistically and ideologically), decontextualization (i.e. failing to deal with the collocation context), and persistent looking for the primary sense of the collocates.

5. The paper finally recommends that collocation be given more focus in training translation students through a number of strategies, the most important of which are; directing trainees' attention to the syntagmatic relations of lexical items, isolating, at the end of every lecture/text, the most important

collocations, and advising students of translation to have specialized dictionaries of collocation in their home libraries.

endix )

Study Test

Name: Cumulative Average:

Translate the following sentences into English.

١.المضغ الجيد للطعام يجنبك التهاب المعدة.

٢. اقامت اختي حفلة عيد ميلادها الاسبوع الماضي.

٣.التجارة المستترة تضر بالاقتصاد الوطني .

٤. وعليه فقد عقدت مجلسا للعدل ونظمت هذا السند وتلوته علنا.

٥. تتحلل الاملاح الضارة بمياه الري وتتجمع في الاماكن المنخفضة وتعمل على قتل النباتات المحيطة.

٦. يعد احتلال البلدان عملا غبيا تماما.

٧. يسعى مجلس الامن لجعل العالم خاليا من اسلحة الدمار الشامل.

٨. حملنا صندوق الكتب الى الطابق الرابع وكان عملا شاقا حقا.

٩. تعتبير مقدمة هذا العقد جزءا لايتجزء منه وتقرأ معه وحدة واحدة.

١٠. انها فرصة ذهبية. ان فقدتها، ستندم عليها.

١١.يعقد الزواج بموافقة الطرفين وبكامل حريتهما ودون اي مانع خارجي.

١٢. هلا اسديت لي معروفا وحملت هذا الصندوق عني؟

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